

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## God Bless America

JOHN O. KILLENS

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*The absurdity of racial discrimination and segregation is rarely more evident than when it appears in the armed forces, as Americans of all races are called upon to fight and risk their lives for our common country. This poignant tale (1952) by black novelist, essayist, editor, and cofounder of the Harlem Writers Guild John Oliver Killens (1916–87) drives the point home. Although African Americans had fought in all of America’s wars, with over one million serving in the armed forces during World War II, all branches of the military were segregated until 1948, when President Harry Truman, by executive order, abolished segregation in the armed forces and ordered full integration of the services. Resistance persisted and implementation was slow; full integration was not achieved until after the end of the Korean War, the time period in which Killens’ story is set. It deals with the departure of a Negro soldier, Joe, headed for Korea.*

*How does Joe understand his military service? Why is he willing to risk his life for the United States? With whom do you identify more, Joe or his friend Luke Robinson—or Joe’s wife Cleo? Why, at the end, is Joe disillusioned and angered? Why and how does Joe go forward, despite his anger and shame? Do you admire him for doing so?*

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